

## City Hall must take steps to help the homeless

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Some 18 months after announcing a housing program, the mayor last week announced a plan to reduce homelessness by two-thirds over the next five years. The City Hall plan includes a promise to build 12,000 so-called supportive housing units that also provide social services.



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It sounds ambitious when compared with the 5,000 supportive units announced at the

end of 2002, but it still falls short of the need — more than 18,000 units — and the financing remains unclear. The mayor ought to use the 60 days he gave his commissioners to work out the details, including financing, to increase the program goals to meet the need.

Other aspects of the initiative announced in a speech last week demonstrate recognition of the benefits of preventing homelessness in the first place. Almost every budget negotiation I can recall includes the City Council's restoration of funding for anti-eviction legal programs.

And housing advocates would prefer even more funding for that program. That's why New Yorkers ought to be encouraged by the mayor's focus on preventing "needless evictions" at Housing Court.

The acknowledgement that government must approach a problem holistically makes it easier to allocate funds to the agency or program that can address a problem. At the last meeting of the executive board of Services Now for Adult Persons Inc., which serves eastern Queens, my fellow board members and I digressed into a discussion of the city budget and funding for Meals on Wheels, or MOW.

As readers may recall the so-called pilot plan to switch to frozen meals instead of daily hot meals delivered to needy seniors involved saving all of \$500,000. The MOW program involves in-home visits by senior agency staffers who report back to their program any concerns about the well-being of seniors who get the meals.

This enables the local senior programs and agencies to intervene to provide services for seniors, which help keep them in their homes and healthy; it certainly reduces the prospect of costly medical interventions. Of course, those costs come out of budgets other than from the Department for the Aging, so DFTA can show a savings at the expense of increased Medicaid and other health costs.

This important change in mindset, that preventing homelessness produces overall budget

savings, gives hope for the changes needed. The initiatives that help avert homelessness, including anti-eviction legal services, counseling, community housing preservation programs and more affordable housing cost taxpayers less.

New Yorkers should watch the Web site [www.nyc.gov/endinghomelessness](http://www.nyc.gov/endinghomelessness) as specific details emerge. The commitment to post the recommendations is bold and welcome. Any delay or failure to move forward would become a symbolic “empty chair” as a televised debate. The public and those who watch government would see clearly the absence of any progress.

Just in case some folks there need help, last summer this column noted the possible savings that should support supportive housing and the development of more affordable housing: The savings include in excess of \$30,000 realized by moving a homeless individual from the shelter system to supportive housing.

Shifting homeless families to permanent units saves almost as much. Finally, shift the billions for jails and shelters in the capital budget to build housing.

Funding for affordable housing development can come from a variety of sources, including:

- \*Several billion in existing city capital funds
- \*State housing programs
- \*Battery Park City revenues used as originally intended
- \*Redirect Community Development Block Grants
- \*Federalization of city-developed housing in the New York City Housing Authority’s portfolio (\$20 million annually)
- \*Recycle millions in repaid housing loans that currently go to general revenues
- \*Apply a portion of the city’s mortgage recording tax to affordable housing (5 percent to 10 percent would realize \$20 million to \$40 million)
- \*Apply fines levied by the Housing Court and some Buildings fines to housing preservation
- \*Review abatement and zoning opportunities for private development of affordable units
- \*Convert private emergency apartments for homeless families into permanent placements
- \*City and state pension funds

\*Surplus Federal Housing Administration

\*State savings from reduced use of emergency shelters

The above are just some revenue sources. Another interesting source followed a recent discussion of the debate and news stories on the mayor's \$400 homeowner abatement pending before the state Senate when it reconvenes this summer.

Some concern exists that any City Council adjustment of property tax "class shares" to benefit homeowners an average of some \$75 might weigh against Senate action to allow the abatement.

Those who complain that homeowners pay fewer taxes proportionately than their share of overall property values fail to recognize that homeowners receive no benefit from their housing value except when they sell. Perhaps the city should capture some of the appreciated value on the sale of private homes to affordable housing.

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